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ABSTRACT

This report profiles the issue of youth violence: the history of its appearance in U.S. culture, the recent escalation of gang activity in U.S. communities, and the strategies put forth in smaller cities to meet this challenge. The report notes that there has been an explosion of gang violence in the United States that has been fostered by a vacuum in economic opportunity and a lack of purpose in life, with both conditions further aggravated by the narcotics business. Centering violence-prevention strategies on penalty and incarceration only causes the community to further estrange itself from its youth. New strategies are needed that are more broad based and community wide that stress education, employment, and the health care needs of youth and their families. Small cities are in a unique position to meet the challenge because gang violence is a fairly new problem for them, and a timely intervention could potentially eradicate it. Several small city efforts in stemming gang violence are highlighted. Lessons learned in addressing youth violence are that gangs are a symptom of social ills that can best be cured by education, training, and jobs; that interdisciplinary partnerships can help bridge generational gaps and break down traditional barriers in the community; and that youth interventions targeting younger children pay big personal and community dividends. (GLR)

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ED 366 706

ISSUES IN BRIEF

A Report Series of the
PEW PARTNERSHIP FOR CIVIC CHANGE

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WINTER 1993

Youth Violence: *Gangs on Main Street, USA*

Scenes of youth violence and organized gang activity — drive-by shootings, drug dealing, random homicide — appear with increasing frequency in newspapers and broadcasts, on prime-time television dramas and in controversial Hollywood films. To many Americans these images of gang violence, while tragic, remain just that — images, not real problems that affect them and their communities. Most still think of gangs as phenomenon of the inner city, a tragedy erupting in the housing projects of Chicago, the abandoned buildings of the South Bronx, and the streets of Los Angeles. But gangs are no longer a problem only in large cities. From Peoria, Illinois to Salem, Oregon, from Springfield, Missouri to Fort Collins, Colorado, from Green Bay, Wisconsin to Rochester, Minnesota, gang activity is on the rise. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change recently asked selected cities with populations of 50,000 to 150,000 to identify the top three issues facing their communities. Nearly a third of these cities cited youth violence and escalating gang activity as a major problem. This report profiles the issue of youth violence — the history of its appearance in our culture, the recent escalation of gang activity in our communities, and the strategies put forth in smaller cities to meet this challenge.

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Forthcoming ISSUES IN BRIEF

Schools as Community Centers: *New Purposes and Practices*
Neighborhood Revitalization: *Restoring Community, Restoring Homes*

Background. Gangs are not a new or exclusively an urban phenomenon. In a country that finds its roots in self-reliance and individualism, the periodic appearance of "outlaw" bands and accompanying vigilantism are as much a part of our history as constitutional conventions. During the Revolutionary War, Buccaneers led by the notorious Jean Laffitte fought against the British in Louisiana in support of Andrew Jackson, while bands of outlaws were prominent in the early days of the Wild West (Taylor 1-2). In the first half of this century, the Mafia rose to prominence, while the last decades of it have witnessed another, and perhaps the bloodiest yet, incarnation of violence among the youth of our cities. It is not a new circumstance that those on the margin, either geographically, culturally, or economically, take the law into their own hands and develop alternative forms of self-governance.

Gangs, in the modern sense of the word—urban youth often involved in delinquent behavior— emerged as a problem in the United States before the turn of the century when large numbers of immigrants, primarily from southeastern Europe, came seeking a better life in the States. Lacking skills, these immigrants were exploited in the labor force, and faced poverty and discrimination. Native Anglo-Americans viewed these European newcomers as culturally and racially different and did not accept their assimilation into American employment and cultural institutions. Youth gangs emerged in this situation where conflict between first-generation immigrants and their children about cultural identity led young people to look to their peer groups for a sense of belonging and purpose. After a couple of generations, most of these earlier European immigrants assimilated into American life, and the problems associated with poverty, such as youth gangs, inadequate housing, and unemployment, became less severe (Vigil 3-4).

This scenario has been replayed countless times as people from other cultures resettled in the United States. The increasing difficulty immigrants (including those of African descent whose immigration was forced) faced in urban adaptation contributed to the persistence of gangs in the street life, especially in neighborhoods where new Americans settled. More recently, white supremacist gangs have also experienced a resurgence and are contributing to escalating violence in communities across the country. Gangs have traditionally offered, and continue to offer, a sense of identity to youth who feel shut out from employment and educational opportunities and estranged from the dominant cultural institutions.

Gangs and the New Frontier. Though youth gangs have customarily been associated with delinquent behavior, the past decade has witnessed an explosion in gang violence. Semi-automatic weapons have replaced fist-fights or knives as the way to settle disputes, with deadly consequences. It would be misleading to assume that all incidents of youth violence are gang-related. Nonetheless, recent statistics confirm that violence in our society and among our youth has reached epidemic proportions. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of teenagers arrested for murder increased eighty-five percent between 1987 and 1991, and homicide is now the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (Bailey 7).

The factors contributing to the dramatic increase in gang activity and its accompanying violence are numerous and complex. To begin with, the changing economic base of the United States resulted in increased unemployment, poverty, and isolation among the citizens of the inner city. As the country shifted from an industrial to a service economy, well-paying manufacturing jobs left many cities, especially in the North. Individuals without skilled training, who formerly could have secured stable manufacturing jobs, found no viable alternative. Low-paying positions in fast-food restaurants or car washes were typical of the remaining "career opportunities" in these neighborhoods. At the same time, cutbacks in education and job training did little to prepare these workers for the demands of the new marketplace. The changing economy contributed to the persistent poverty, poor housing,

health care, and education, and the decline of the family in communities accross the country. Further, churches, schools, and other institutions that once were unquestioned authorities in the community felt a gradual decline in their influence.

Into this vacuum of opportunity and purpose stepped the lucrative and deadly narcotics business. Recent research examines gang culture in the context of a highly organized entrepreneurial enterprise. In his study of Detroit, Carl Taylor argues that gangs represent "an outlaw culture employed by the narcotics industry" (6). The phenomenal profit of the international narcotics business has led gangs to expand their notion of "territory" from a street corner or immediate neighborhood to "intrastate, interstate, or international" boundaries (Taylor 6-7). The money of illegal drug trafficking, and the power it creates, has allowed the highly organized narcotics business to expand its franchise into communities of all sizes across the nation. The last few years have witnessed the transformation of much of gang activity from very localized neighborhood bands of youth to highly organized operations of narcotics trade.

In recent years, gangs have spread their networks, based mostly in larger cities, to encompass smaller cities and even rural communities. As new markets for narcotics, smaller cities became the target of an illegal industry seeking to expand its reach. Gangs and their accompanying violence appeared in these mid-size communities—Main Street, USA, so to speak—seemingly overnight. One midwestern community described the problem for the Pew Partnership, "Gangs are a new element in the greater Rochester (Minnesota) area. In 1990, there were rumors. In 1991, there was substantiated evidence of gangs. In 1992, clear indicators emerged that there were youth gangs with a stronghold in the community. In 1993, there have been regular reports of violence, fighting, and other gang related activities in the community. . . . Without action, the potential for rapid growth and increased violence within and among the youth gangs and the community is inevitable in Rochester."

Cities across the country are telling the same story. Salem, Oregon experienced a ninety-seven percent increase in the number of gang members and affiliates between October 1992 and April 1993. *The Fayetteville Observer Times* (North Carolina) reported, "In 1992 Fayetteville had a four percent drop in the number of crimes but an increase in violent crimes with the number of juveniles being arrested for these crimes increasing dramatically." When asked by the Pew Partnership to identify major problems in the community, Topeka, Kansas responded, "Far and away, the single most talked about issue during the past two years (1992-93) has been crime. . . . For a city of Topeka's size, located in the conservative Midwest, violent crime, carjackings, drive-by shootings and gangs evoke substantial fear through the community." Other midwestern cities echoed these concerns, "As Davenport (Iowa) prepared to celebrate its 158 year anniversary, the city's midwestern charm and attitudes have been affected by big city problems. The Police Department has documented over 2000 gang members currently residing in the city. . . . A recent survey indicated that over sixty percent of the youth felt unsafe of city streets." Tallahassee, Florida lamented, "Funerals for young black men have become a regular occurrence" in some neighborhoods of the city.

Defining the Problem. In their attempts to address increasing gang activity and youth violence, communities have tended, at least initially, to treat the issue as a problem for law enforcement. The "problem youth" in our cities were viewed as the responsibility of the police and the justice department, and more severe penalties and jail terms for those convicted of drug related crimes were implemented to discourage youth from participating in gang activity and the narcotics industry. A "war on drugs" was declared in many communities, and law enforcement agencies were appointed the task of cleaning up the neighborhoods by clearing out the drug dealers.

In his study of gangs in Chicago, Felix Padilla examined the philosophy of the "war on drugs" and argued that this strategy resulted in further isolating youth from the very institutions and individu-

als who might have helped them. He explored the "belligerent attitude" (48) adopted by the City of Chicago toward individuals involved in drug use and distribution:

Since the early 1970's every plan has been fashioned around one central idea: to severely punish apprehended and convicted dealers. All of the legislation, policies, and programs have been aimed at removing so called drug criminals from society by imposing large mandatory prison sentences. . . .

It is difficult to determine the outcomes of these various initiatives. One thing is sure, however, city police officers, neighborhood parents, and other adults are now pitted against gang members and youngsters believed to be drug users. . . . It has become a war between "good" and "evil." Gang members, dealers, and users of drugs represent evil.

That some parents are encouraged to side against neighborhood youngsters, some of whom are their own children, suggests society's lack of understanding about the everyday experiences of these youngsters and how best to deal with them." (48-51)

By centering the strategies for reduction of gang violence on penalty and incarceration, the community, in effect, further estranged itself from its youth.

It is short-sighted to label and pursue youth involved in the illegal drug trade as intrinsically "evil," without examining the factors that have contributed to their involvement in the narcotics business. The arguable ineffectiveness of the "war on drugs" has led policy makers, community leaders, and researchers to reconsider the wide range of social and economic factors contributing to the rise of illegal drug distribution and its accompanying violence. Increasingly, researchers have begun to study gang activity as, first and foremost, a business, an employment opportunity for inner city youth (Kornblum, Padilla, Taylor). Padilla, for example, discusses gang activity as an extension of the "informal economy" common in low-income neighborhoods where residents often engage in self-employed, at-home work like "street peddling, baby-sitting, home food preparation, jewelry and cosmetic sales" to support themselves when they are unable to earn adequate income from traditional employers (48).

When asked about their activities, gang members in Padilla's study often referred to selling drugs as their job or business, with certain expectations of hours to work, responsibilities to perform, persons to report to, and income to earn. "Spike," a juvenile gang member, explains the entrepreneurial start-up period to a researcher:

This was our neighborhood, so we decided to run our business from there. We wanted to control what was ours. At first it was real tough because we didn't have any cash. So, we would try different ways to raise enough to make a project. You know, we would all chip in; you know there was no hassle about the money or stuff like that. We wanted the business to get off the ground, you know, make it work because we didn't have nothing for us. This was going to be something that was going to be ours, you know, for us. And once we got going we took control. But at first it was real difficult. And then we had to make sure that people did not spend gang money on themselves. So, it took a little while to get going. But we knew that there was a lot of money to be made in this business. This was a business made for us; it was something like it was sent by God. It was a business that we could do straight from the neighborhood that we controlled and knew real well. How could you go wrong? (Padilla 97)

This narrative of how a gang became involved in the narcotics industry, ironically, also expresses a haunting sense of community and partnership—youngsters pooling their resources to start a business, "something that was going to be for us" in "our neighborhood." Other gang members described their activities in the context of, for lack of a better phrase, one could call neighborhood pride:

We gave our neighborhood its identity. You can find our marks all over it. The different murals that we painted, the signs we sprayed on wall, on the garages and alleys—hey, these are things about our gang identity. In every neighborhood you can find these kinds of signs and stuff. In this neighborhood, in our neighborhood, you can find signs that are about us. They let you know who runs things around here. And, of course, we say that the neighborhood is in us. We talk about that, especially when we hear that other gangs are planning to make a move on us. We talk about how we are marked by the different things that

happened around here. There are a whole lot of them. Like, we have gotten beat up here. Opposition gangs have come after us here. They know where to find us because everybody knows this is our hood. The cops have chased us here. We have busted some heads here. This is where we make our cash, and that's because we've been here long enough to get to know the neighborhood real good." (Padilla 27)

One wonders what the potential for change would be if this spirit of community could be redirected in more positive ways, if this entrepreneurial flair could find an outlet in legal commerce. Clearly, the remarks of these gangs members reflect a profound desire for something to identify with, for a place of belonging, for an opportunity for meaningful employment.

The Strategy. In the realization that youth violence demands a broad-based, community-wide approach, many leaders are calling for a more comprehensive solution to the problem through strategies addressing the education, employment, and health care needs of youth and their families. Joan Wagnon, a state legislator and executive diector of the YWCA in Topeka, Kansas asserts, "One more government program, one more cop on the street is not going to work. . . . The community needs to take responsibility and initiative that develop at the grass roots level to reclaim the neighborhood and intervene in the lives of its youth. We need a whole neighborhood philosophy. No single approach works."

Smaller cities are in a unique position to meet the challenge of escalating youth violence and gang activity. Since the problem in these communities is fairly new, a timely intervention could potentially eradicate it — thereby directing a whole generation of youth to more positive opportunities. While some smaller cities are bewildered by the newness of the problem, others are poised to meet the challenge and are mobilizing their communities to address the problem. In Peoria, Illinois, members of rival gangs work together pouring concrete to build a sidewalk. In Yakima, Washington, teenagers in a low-income neighborhood where gang activity is prevalent, congregate around one of the city's "Night Action" centers, offering educational enrichment and recreational activities. In Las Cruces, New Mexico, middle school students work with an award-winning playwright to perform a play addressing their fears and concerns about a recent shooting at their school. Visalia, California exemplifies the ambitious attitude of many smaller communities, claiming, "In three years the goal is to report that gang activity is non-existent and was a short-lived problem in Visalia."

PEORIA, ILLINOIS
Population 114,000

Peoria heard its wake-up call early in 1993 when five homicides occurred in a six-week period. Community leaders and outside consultants negotiated a truce between the two rival gangs, or "nations," and then sat down with nations leaders to discuss the major issues confronting the community. During these conversations, the young people shared with city leaders their central concern—jobs. The city formed a broad-based task force, including gang members and former gang affiliates, to deal with the immediate crisis and also to look for long-term solutions to the problem. In collaboration with business and non-profit agencies, the city established Build Peoria, a life skills, pre-employment counseling, and job training initiative. After a thorough orientation, counseling, and assessment period, participants attend classroom instruction for two hours in the morning and work in on-the-job training positions constructing sidewalks and weatherizing buildings for six hours in the afternoon. Participants work with counselors to develop career interests and plan for further education or permanent job placement. The program can accommodate thirty participants. Within a few months, there were over 50 youth on the waiting list.

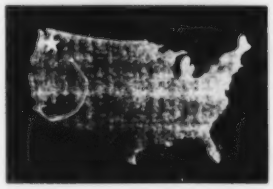
Bashir Ali, executive director of the Central Illinois Private Industry Council, emphasizes that Build Peoria is not a gang program. "Gangs are symptoms of the problem, not the cause of the

problem," says Ali. "Unemployment, under-employment, issues of self-esteem—these are at the root of the problem." According to Ali, unemployment and underemployment among African-American males in the community ranges from fifty to seventy percent. By targeting African-American males in Peoria neighborhoods where poverty is widespread, Build Peoria attempts to bridge the gap between those who have job skills and access to opportunity, and those who don't.

Marcus Burnside, a crisis intervention specialist with the Community Action Agency and a leader of the Vice Lords, has been instrumental in the development of the Build Peoria program. According to Burnside, "Most of the guys here, without Build Peoria, would be hanging out on street corners." When asked if any of his fellow Vice Lords think it's "not cool" to be active in community affairs and involved with the Gang Task Force, he replies, "Some do—but they have no desire to change. The majority are pleased and willing to participate. . . . Most would rather have the stability of jobs. It's more of an economic issue than being cool."

TOPEKA, KANSAS
Population 120,000

Joan Wagnon, executive director of the YWCA, admits that gang activity and youth violence are "a very real problem" in Topeka. "It's not just a New York, and a Chicago, and a Los Angeles problem—but a problem in communities throughout the Midwest." Topeka has begun to direct more intervention efforts at younger adolescents. While elementary school children have access to some after-school programs, and older teenagers can participate in various community activities like intramural leagues, there are virtually no programs in place for middle school students who are dismissed from school at 2:30 p.m. and have large periods of time without adult supervision or structured activities. Without adequate opportunities for enrichment and recreation, younger adolescents are increasingly at risk. For example, while the teen pregnancy rate for older youth has dropped in recent years, the rate of pregnancy in the 10-14 age group has increased. Youth violence and gang activity, according to Wagnon, are "the high price we're paying for dysfunctional families. The price we pay for a generation that's grown up without appropriate parenting." The challenge is "getting people to accept responsibility to make their neighborhoods work, to supervise each others' children. . . . It's our problem. It's our children. Gangs are a function of kids who need to belong to something, someone."



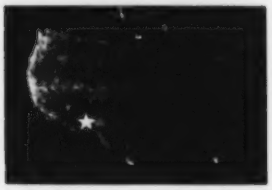
YAKIMA, WASHINGTON
Population 55,000

In 1993, Yakima, Washington asserted that it was the fifth-largest drug distribution center in the country—close behind major metropolitan areas like Miami, Los Angeles, and Denver. The amount of drug-related activity created a staggering problem for a city of this size. In 1991, the city experienced a sharp increase in juvenile gang activities—frequent drive-by shootings were occurring and many citizens felt victimized. The 30-bed juvenile detention center was housing over 60 youth, while other offenders were scheduled to serve their sentences two to three months after effective deterrent. The city realized that it needed an alternative strategy.

In response to the crisis, twelve city youth service agencies came together to form the Yakima Gang Prevention/Intervention Coalition. Leaders from various agencies pooled their cash and in-kind support to develop resources for initiating youth intervention programs at five locations throughout the city. "Kids Place" offered after school activities to youth ages six to twelve, while "Night Action" operated in the evenings to provide recreational opportunities to older youth. Twenty-two months after the initiative was developed, gang related crime in the areas where the programs were implemented dropped eighty-seven percent.

Yakima admits, though, that one obstacle to meeting the challenge of youth violence is the denial

on the part of certain segments of the community, particularly the affluent, that gang activity is a problem—or more specifically, that it is a problem for all citizens, and not simply an issue just for law enforcement to handle. Any long-term solution to the problem demands outreach and educational initiatives to the community at large to create awareness of the issue and support for implementing effective intervention strategies.



LAS CRUCES, NEW MEXICO
Population 63,000

Evidence of gang activity started appearing in Las Cruces, New Mexico in the 1980s. Community leaders in Las Cruces at first tried to downplay the incidents of youth violence as a way of discouraging gang members by subduing any media coverage of their activities. The city explained to the Pew Partnership, "The daily newspaper, at the request of the Police Department, didn't describe events as gang related in the hopes that those involved would not be encouraged by coverage of their deeds. But there was no hiding the graffiti, the drive-by shootings occurring in more and more neighborhoods, and reports of youth bringing guns to school made the news. And finally, a shooting at a middle school during school hours and our first gang related deaths occurred in the streets; we knew we had trouble."

After the shooting in April, 1992 at the Zia Middle School, Las Cruces came together to confront the escalating youth violence and is establishing a model for civic intervention programs. Led by Mark Medoff, a Tony Award-winning playwright whose daughter attended the Zia Middle School at the time of the shooting, the community mobilized to address the fears of their children. Over 5,000 students and adults were asked to write about their concerns, and these responses formed the basis of the play, *Another Planet: Voices from Las Cruces, N.M.*, which was performed at New Mexico State University in May, 1993. Jarred by the sound of a gun shot, audiences at the performance watch child actors from the community storm the stage crying, "A boy got shot," and listen to children voice their fears and concerns. One child wants a bullet-proof vest and a helmet for Christmas. A twelve year old performs a rap song he has written about gangs:

> *Gangs are rough/gangs are tough.*
> *Gangs are bad/Gangs can get mad.*
> *Gang is the password to insanity.*
> *Gangs are out of humanity.*
> *Take it from me and take it straight.*
> *If you listen to them, you're taking the bait.*
> *Don't take it from them, take it from me.*
> *Education is the place to be.*

Despite a very real, unsanitized view of the problems facing children, the play concludes with a positive vision, "Another planet? We're here; we're on it" (Williams A1).

The play was a catalyst to motivate residents to become involved in their community. Medoff's leadership is a model for mobilizing citizens to participate in civic affairs and make their voices heard.

Toward A Vision. Youth gangs are not an isolated problem in large metropolitan areas but are making their presence known in smaller communities across the country. In the absence of viable employment, family life, and educational opportunities, an increasing number of youth are turning to gangs for a sense of purpose and belonging. By association with gangs, youngsters often become involved in illegal, dangerous, and life-threatening activities. Gangs, in turn, result from and contribute to the rising crime rates, the loss of community spirit, and the lack of hope in cities throughout the nation.

A few lessons emerge from a review of the factors contributing to the escalation of gang activity and the strategies addressing the problem of youth violence:

- *Gangs are a symptom of social ills that can best be cured by education, training, and jobs, both for potential gang members and their families.*

- *Processes that address the problem of youth violence through interdisciplinary partnerships—like pairing programs in the arts with those in the social services—bridge generational gaps, break down traditional barriers in the community, and create less threatening environments for conversations to take place.*
- *Youth intervention and gang prevention programs targeting younger children pay big personal and community dividends.*

While it is tempting to look to law enforcement for an immediate response to escalating youth violence, a long-term solution to meet the needs of at-risk youth demands comprehensive, community-wide collaboration. Angie Hammons, a counselor at a youth intervention program in Fort Wayne, Indiana explains, "These kids are drawn into gang activity because the gangs will give and die for them. They'll give one hundred percent of their life to them and so we, as adults, have to be giving—have to be willing to give one hundred percent of our lives to these children" (Evening News). Across the country, citizens are forming broad-based coalitions to seek solutions to the problems facing our youth, our neighborhoods, and our cities. Cities, large and small, must work together to provide youth with supportive environments, purposeful activities, and a vision of a community working for the common good.

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ISSUES IN BRIEF

Issues in Brief is a biannual report series of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, a national program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, to address problems in smaller American cities. The series seeks to increase awareness of particular urban issues by reviewing their emergence in our culture and by examining how communities are currently addressing specific challenges. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change encourages collaboration between public, private, and not-for-profit sectors in communities, profiles urban issues in the context of developing strategies for systemic change, and suggests new models for strengthening communities. For more information about the Pew Partnership, or for copies of this report, write Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 145-C Ednam Drive, Charlottesville, Virginia, 22903, or phone (804) 971-2073.

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